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SIPDIS

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA/PPD PAGNEW, NEA/MAG, NEA/PI, DRL, NEA/PA
LONDON FOR MOC
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SUBJECT: MAGAZINES SEIZED AND EDITORS CONVOKED FOR DISRESPECTING THE
KING AND ISLAM

11. (U) This message is sensitive but unclassified; please protect
accordingly.

12. (U) Summary: Moroccan authorities seized, on orders of PM Jettou,
the most recent editions of TelQuel and Nichane, weekly current
affairs magazines on August 4 for violating laws that forbid
criticism of the monarchy and cause offense to public morality and
Islam. The seized issues published an editorial critical of the
King's Throne ay speech in which he stated that the upcoming
prliamentary elections would strengthen Moroccan deocracy, and an
article on sex in Islamic culture. Ahmed Benchensi a former IV, who
directs both mgazines and a college, has been questioned several
times by police and prosecutors, but is not yet ormally charged.
Their printer was also interrogted. Observers speculate that the
seizure of the Nichane and TelQuel issues may reflect the
government's intent to erode press freedom prior to the ucoming
parliamentary elections. We are deeply cncerned given the key
role of the press role inthe democracy and reform process in
Morocco. EndSummary.

TELQUEL/NICHANE PUSH THE ENVELOPE, AGAIN

13. On Augut 4, 2007, Moroccan authorities seized the proofs f
French-language current affairs magazine TelQue (circulation
25,000) before it went to print an pulled copies of Nichane
(circulation 10,000), ts Arabic-language sister publication, from
newstands. The GOM accuses the publications of violatng laws that
forbid criticism of the monarchy andIslam by printing articles
disrespectful of the King and offensive to public morality. Ahmed
Benchensi, who directs both magazines and is a longtime critic of
the King, was questioned by police for four hours in Casablanca on
August 4 and remained in police custody until the early morning
hours of August 5. He has since been called back twice although
formal charges are not yet filed. He has been instructed to remain
available for further questioning. Authorities lso summoned
Redouane Ramdani, Editor-in-Chief o Nichane for questioning.
TelQuel and Nichane boh have a history of attracting government
ire. For example, in January 2007, Nichane was shut down for two
months after it published jokes the government and courts deemed
offensive to Islam, prompting the eventual resignation of its then
editor Driss Ksikes, who received a suspended sentence of three
years.

ELECTIONS DON'T EQUAL DEMOCRACY

¶4. The confiscated issues of Nichane and TelQuel included several articles critical of the King, including an editorial on the King's Throne Day speech by Ahmed Benchemsi entitled "What are you saying Master?" In the editorial, Benchemsi claimed that the September 7 parliamentary elections are "meaningless in a country where the King wields near absolute power." His statement directly contradicts the King's assessment in his Throne Day speech that the election would strengthen Moroccan democracy. Benchemsi also called into question the King's assertion that suffrage is "not to decide on the form of government because there is already a consensus that matter." In addition, he opined that the King should not have jurisdiction over all three branches of power.

A CHANGE IN TONE AND LANGUAGE

¶5. Nichane also published an article entitled "Vote, God Bless You!" signed by its Editor-in-Chief Redouane Ramdani. The article asserts that the King's discourse regarding the 2007 parliamentary elections has changed over time and now seeks to maintain the status quo. According to the article, in October 2006, the King called upon all parties "to respect the voters, to be clear and transparent in their speeches, and to select the best candidates to represent their constituencies." However, in the Throne Day speech, the article states, the King expressed satisfaction with the political parties and no longer urged them to protect the interest of the people. Instead, Ramdani quotes the King as saying "he [the King] will confront those who doubt the usefulness of elections and attempt to

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undermine their credibility." This is now put into action.

WHERE ARE WE AFTER EIGHT YEARS?

¶6. The seized edition of Nichane also included an article by Benchemsi entitled "Where are you taking us, Brother? with the subtitle: "I speak and you obey." The article offers a critical assessment of the reign of Mohammed VI, stating "Moroccans had great expectations after Mohammed VI took power, but are disappointed eight years later." Benchemsi claims that the only important achievement of the King was the Moudawana law governing the rights of women.

WHAT'S SEX GOT TO DO WITH IT?

¶7. Nichane also published an article on sex in the Arab world entitled "Sex in Islamic Culture," which included photographs of orientalist paintings of nude women. The article discusses the taboo subjects of the sex lives of married couples, homosexuality, and the Prophet's statements about sexual relations saying, "he [the Prophet] talked openly about the most intimate sexual relationships between men and women." Although the subject matter of the article is controversial in this conservative Muslim country, knowledgeable observers point out that Nichane and TelQuel have written on this topic in the past without government intervention. Most commentators, we have spoken to, believe this article alone would not have prompted the authorities to seize the edition, leading some to assert that criticism of the King is the only steadfast taboo. In response to the move against the printer, the press union (SNPM) has called for a work stoppage today.

ARE SEIZURES JUSTIFIED?

¶8. In a communique issued on August 4, Prime Minister Driss Jettou stated that the magazines were seized because they published

articles that violate laws that make it illegal to publish articles that are disrespectful of the monarchy, discredit Islam or are offensive to public morality. In response to the confiscation of the publications, Youness M'Jahed, President of the Moroccan Union of Journalists (SNPM), denounced the seizures as censorship and asserted that the articles do not harm the monarchy or offend Islam. In addition, independent Arabic-language daily Al Massae published a front-page editorial on August 6 that denounced the seizure as undemocratic and accused the authorities as unduly restricting press freedom.

PRESS FREEDOM UNDER THREAT

¶9. (SBU) Observers speculate that the seizure of the Nichane and TelQuel issues when considered in light of government-led legal action in recent months against publications and journalists may reflect a GOM strategy to erode press freedom prior to the September parliamentary elections. The seizure follows a long list of GOM acts of censorship and restrictions on press freedoms that have already been reported. For example, as of August 6, the weekly French-language daily Le Journal Hebdo suspended publishing until it receives authorization from authorities in Rabat. On July 17, Abderrahmim Ariri, the director of Al Watan, was arrested for publishing a military document on Morocco's terrorist alert level and is currently awaiting trial. The Al Watan case drew strong international condemnation from watchdog organizations like Reporters Without Borders (RSF) and the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ). In addition, CPJ issued a report in May that listed Morocco as one of ten worst backsliders on media freedom.

COMMENT

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¶10. (SBU) Benchemsi is a well-known and respected journalist, who has a reputation for pushing the boundaries of press freedom against Morocco's relatively open press. The current crackdown on press freedom in the lead-up to the September parliamentary elections is matter of concern. Despite widespread local and international condemnation, the government of Morocco continues to take steps that hinder the exercise of press freedom. We are deeply concerned about this development and are considering how to engage the GOM, particularly in light of R and other senior visits and pending MCC signing.